

THE UNIONS AND TECHNICIAN REGISTRATION

RICHARD BLAKELEY AND LAUREN USHER
UNIONLEARN



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unionlearn
with the TUC

FOREWORD

Technicians work in high-skilled and rewarding occupations that provide good opportunities for career progression in a range of industries. However, in this country, the work technicians do is often not well understood or highly regarded by the general public. As a consequence too few young people are choosing to pursue routes from education into technician occupations, leaving our economy with an alarming shortage of technicians that is likely to become even more severe in the years ahead.

At Gatsby we are seeking to address this problem by helping to restore a strong occupational identity to the technician workforce through voluntary schemes of professional registration. We are delighted that unionlearn has agreed to work with us in these efforts, not least because, as Richard Blakeley and Lauren Usher note in this essay, many unions have strong historical ties to the technician workforce. We hope that our partnership with unionlearn can capitalise on this legacy and increase awareness of technician registration among union members.

We are also encouraged by Richard and Lauren's description of the clear common ground that unions share with the many professional bodies that have technician members. In other countries, bodies such as these define and protect the occupational identity that technicians in the UK currently lack. We believe that by working together, unions and professional bodies have the potential to engender, from within the profession itself, the occupational identity and stature that should be associated with technicians working in today's economy. Unionlearn will be seeking to reinforce the links between unions and professional bodies as part of its work, and we look forward to supporting and working with them in this endeavour over the months and years ahead.

Nigel Thomas

The Gatsby Charitable Foundation

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Trade union leader Clive Jenkins is remembered by some for his combined brashness and charm, his sometimes controversial political persona and his South Wales lilt. He appeared on the television more frequently than modern trade union leaders (and not just when there was a strike) and wrote weekly columns in a national newspaper in the 1970s and 1980s on a variety of industrial and political issues. Jenkins boasted of “organising the middle classes” and was reportedly the first ‘millionaire’ trade unionist (he had substantial side earnings through publishing and shrewd property investment). It is illustrative of his determination to provide a voice for trade unions in difficult times that in 1982 a brilliant *Not the Nine O’clock News* parody of BBC 1’s *Question Time* had Jenkins (played by Richard Davies) doggedly insisting “I will have my say” when there was an attempt to silence him on the subject of imminent nuclear holocaust. A grumpy Robin Day (played by Griff Rhys Jones) tersely replied “Well, I wish you wouldn’t”.

His life turned around in his first job when a kindly works manager paid his fees and twice-a-week train fares from Port Talbot to attend Swansea Technical College to study metallurgy. Three years later he was in charge of the lab and after another two he was a night shift foreman. He never looked back, quickly establishing his career and becoming an influential voice in the Association of Scientific Workers.

Putting Jenkins’ personality to one side, his career is illustrative of trends in trade unions that have a bearing on their outlook on technicians and registration with professional bodies today. As General Secretary, Clive Jenkins built the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF, previously the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs), representing a membership of 650,000, including laboratory and technical workers in universities, the National Health Service and chemical and metal manufacturing. Jenkins steered the formation of this early ‘super union’ through his high profile leadership and the amalgamation of 26 smaller trade unions in the 1970s, including some representing technicians in specific sectors such as the Association of Educational Technicians.

Clive Jenkins retired in 1988 and his membership is now part of UNITE, the largest union in the country, which has 1.5 million members. UNITE brings together the technician membership profile that Jenkins built with technicians from other sectors such as construction and utilities. However, technician membership is not just concentrated there. In fact, nearly all trade unions will have some technicians in their membership. For example the RMT have technicians who work in the rail industry, Prospect has technicians working in scientific roles in government and the private sector, UNISON has technicians in education and the private utilities and BECTU represents technicians working in theatre and television.

The consolidation of smaller and occupation focused trade unions has continued since Jenkins’ time at the helm, reflecting the political and economic environment that trade unions have faced in the last 25 years. Employment legislation in the 1980s curtailed the activity of trade unions. A deregulated labour market characterised by reduced employment rights and a growth in casual employment has created real challenges for workers and trade unions who wish to organise their interests. As a response to these trends, consolidation of memberships along sectoral lines has become the norm with the exception of health professionals (who in some cases have bodies that are both professional and trade union in nature).

Further, unions were marginalised in policy making over vocational education and training (VET) in the 1980s through the abolition of tripartite bodies (government, employers and trade unions working together on employment issues) such as the Manpower Services Commission and the industry training boards. This period saw the introduction of the 'training market' we largely have now in which decisions are left more to the discretion of employers and individuals. This contributed largely to a rapid decline of apprenticeships during this period, which trade unions had traditionally supported, and had previously offered a clear pathway in to a career as a technician and many other occupations.

The role of trade unions as champions of technical training (which they have been since the first TUC annual congress in Manchester in 1868) was therefore diminished, but began a recovery through the development of TUC Learning Services (a forerunner to unionlearn) and the development of the Union Learning Representative (ULR) role in the 1990s. More recently, the development of unionlearn with government support confirmed that trade unions have re-established their important role in skills and training.

Technicians as an occupational group have found it hard to maintain their sense of identity and status and preserve their knowledge base in such economic and political conditions. Many don't recognise themselves as technicians; it's not recognised in their job title and they have never had the chance to consider what career pathways may lay ahead of them. Others know exactly what it means to be a technician but find very little support and recognition in their workplaces. It's only in larger companies, often with trade unions, that a sense of the technician identity still exists, although there is still so much to do to restore their status and to prepare for the recruitment of the next generation of technicians.

Yet recognising and promoting an occupation (craft, trade or profession) such as technicians is precisely why many unions were created. An occupation represents the body of skill and knowledge owned by the worker and unions were formed to recognise and defend the importance of that body. A recognised occupation gives both pride and an independence from being seen simply as an employee of a particular employer. Should trade unions be rethinking the impact of their consolidation and how occupational groups such as technicians can rediscover their voice through their structures? We at unionlearn believe that trade unions should be.

Unionlearn director, Tom Wilson, signalled this new thinking in a Unions 21 publication entitled *The future for unions*:

"Doing more to retain a strong identity for members' distinct occupations is clearly vital, particularly for the bigger general unions. New organisational structures may be needed to increase the profile and autonomy of occupational groups within larger and general unions."

More recently, unionlearn (the learning and skills arm of the Trades Union Congress) has been funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation to develop the trade union role in rebuilding the status, skills and knowledge base of technicians. This is a complementary initiative to the newly reformed Technician Council (made up of government representatives, employers, professional bodies, regulators and trade union representatives) which is driving forward registration with professional bodies in science and engineering as a key measure to upskill the 'technician class'.

For employers, registration offers an assurance of the competence of staff and new recruits, indicates a commitment to their continued professional standards and can help to make the business competitive. For the worker, registration is an important recognition of their skills, knowledge and competence. Earning the designation 'Registered Technician' contributes to economic mobility by making skills more transferable and improving earning capacity.

So what do trade unions bring to the table in 2013? For starters, unionlearn co-ordinates the 'learning revolution' that has taken place in trade unions since the 1990s. The most important development during this time has been the creation of the Union Learning Representative (ULR) role. There have been almost 30,000 trained since 1998 and they play a crucial role in terms of promoting learning in the workplace, offering information, advice and guidance (IAG), negotiating support for learners and working in partnership with employers to improve skills. 230,000 people are given training and learning opportunities through their union every year. In a recent survey of 400 employers, with a total of 6 million employees, 87 per cent said that they wanted to continue to support union learning, with two-thirds saying that it benefited the organisation and 81 per cent saying it benefited employees. So, in other words trade unions bring effective networks that support the delivery of industry training and continued professional development frameworks that have the confidence of all sides of industry.

One thing that is not different to Clive Jenkins' day is that a young person starting in work who could be interested in a 'technical' career might be reliant on a helping hand from a friendly source and could be forgiven for perceiving that higher status jobs are beyond their reach. The loss of careers advice in schools is not helpful to this situation. Neither are the poor levels of understanding in our economy of the work of technicians; certainly in comparison to western economies such as Germany. Membership of professional bodies seems out of reach for many working class people, particularly in the present economic environment where the cost of learning is increasingly being transferred to the individual. Trade unions can play an important role in informing technicians and 'would be' technicians of the opportunities that registration may bring for recognition of skills, supporting them through their training, assessment and continued professional development. We would like to see trade unions recognised as an important part of a network reaching out to technicians and it not being a matter of luck, as it probably was in Jenkins', case that a young person finds their way on to a technician career path.

Trade unions can also help tackle barriers within employment. Recent research has found there to be two approaches to promoting registration: 'The Carrot' and 'The Stick.' The professional bodies can be perceived by workers as a stick that the employer uses to drive up standards. Further, professional bodies can be seen as distant institutions because of their traditional focus on graduates. Professional bodies have difficulties reaching technician workers and so tend to deal directly with the employers. However, even when employers are keen on professional registration as an upskilling measure, they can meet some resistance from staff who feel it is being imposed upon them. This is not an entirely fair depiction of professional bodies: they offer valuable industrial expertise to the worker; are recognised evaluators of standards and qualified assessors of continued professional development. Employers too must be open to supporting registration,

working with trade unions and professional bodies to develop the right policies and culture that encourage workers to pursue it.

Alternatively, the union could be offering more of the carrot approach, as reps (particularly ULRs) are peers and colleagues who are influential on training matters. Where unions see registration as a good thing for workers, in terms of improving career prospects and gaining recognition for the work they do, they can be very influential voices. This is why, as part of unionlearn's project, the development of a toolkit to support registration is important to enabling trade union representatives to further the professional interests of technicians. With the right levels of support in the workplace, trained ULRs could be guiding technicians through the application process, providing support for individuals in completing their portfolio and negotiating and implementing employer support policies for registration.

Complementing the two different approaches of unions and professional bodies could create more positive results: professional bodies adopting a 'top down' approach, working at selling the value to employers; and unions working to promote registration amongst the workers, creating value from the bottom up. But this should only be the first step in a new partnership between trade unions and professional bodies. There is a mutual interest in building the esteem and status of technicians. Couldn't professional bodies and the unions campaign together to raise the status of registered technicians? We certainly think so and plan to share platforms with professional bodies to make this a reality.

Thankfully, trade unions once again are in a position to play an important role in championing technician training and registration in the government's economic planning. For example, trade unions hold seats on the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and also on the boards of Sector Skills Councils. Professional bodies too have considerable influence over the skills agenda and a passion for driving skills within industry forward. Trade unions are big influencers within workplaces over many aspects of work that impact upon skill levels and productivity. Professional bodies are big influencers regarding standards of professional and occupational development. As we move tentatively in to a new age of industrial strategy, trade unions and professional bodies could be joint champions of the investment in technician training that is key to delivering the efficiency and innovation in our industries that will drive the economic recovery.

Unionlearn believes a greater level of shared intelligence gathering and networking regarding professional registration for technicians should be possible. And we would like to encourage trade unions and professional bodies to convene joint events that facilitate raised occupational esteem, improved registration rates and a shared understanding of how professional bodies and trade unions can work together. It should be possible to produce joint publications looking at the skills issues for technicians and how registration would help to overcome them.

Unionlearn also believes that the 'pipeline' is a vital area for development, particularly as 450,000 extra technicians are projected to be needed by employers by 2020. Clarifying the link between apprenticeships and technician registration is essential. In recent years, unionlearn has been an important agent in the recovery of apprenticeships, and trade unions have reinvigorated support for them in their work programmes. In engineering, research identified

the 'pipeline' engineer as the most likely to take up registration because of what it offers in terms of transferable skills. Unionlearn proposes to work with regional, sub-sectoral employer networks and sector skills councils to promote apprenticeships and technician registration. Further, unionlearn proposes to work as partners with professional bodies and others to promote technical apprenticeships in schools and colleges.

Clive Jenkins' career oversaw huge changes in how technicians are represented and their interests promoted within the trade union movement. The structures of trade unions have changed over the last 25 years in response to unfavourable legislation and economic pressures so that they are more sectoral than occupational. Trade unions also endured a period of marginalisation on VET policy making in the 1980s and 90s that is now being recovered.

The occupational profile of technicians has suffered greatly during this period. But there is now a new opportunity to reinvigorate the status and recognition of the occupation. Professional bodies have developed as institutions furthering the interests and skill development needs of the graduate class but, in a changing world, are looking to open up pathways from vocational training. Professional bodies and trade unions in engineering and science have reached a point in history where we could increasingly find common cause on technicians. We should look for opportunities to co-operate and collaborate to deliver on the potential for registration to be a real driver for improved career pathways and continued professional development for a much neglected strata of the British workforce. Employers must too be prepared to play their part, entering in to dialogue with their workforce and trade unions to consider how registration can be supported.

Finally, a word on the uncertainty of such a venture. There may be times when professional bodies and employers find unions evoking Jenkins' determination to 'have our say' challenging. And likewise, trade unions' and workers' suspicion of government, graduate-dominated bodies and employers may not entirely disappear. However, if the experience of the last 25 years teaches us anything, it is that we should be working together to ensure the voice of the technician is strong and heard by those in power, and that their influence can and will be felt in the economic recovery to come. Maybe the next 25 years offer the opportunity to get it right and 'organise' the technician class?

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